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# Ontario's Children *Ontario's Future*

A progress report and  
consultation paper



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# **Ontario's Children** ***Ontario's Future***

**A progress report and consultation paper**





## ***EXECUTIVE SUMMARY***

Children have always been a priority of the Mike Harris government. The Ontario government's funding for many important children's programs increased in the 1990s, despite federal cuts to health and social programs.

In April 1998, Premier Harris commissioned the *Early Years Study*, a groundbreaking report on early child development. The government embraced the study's recommendations to help Ontario's children get off to the best possible start in life.

When the Legislature returned in October 1999, the government committed itself to a bold new initiative that will extend early-development opportunities to every child and parent in Ontario.

As a new century unfolds, we continue to champion our early years vision, calling on all sectors at the community level to work together to ensure that all children have opportunities to reach their full potential.

The provincial government is challenging parents and families, communities, businesses, non-profit organizations, professional networks, associations, volunteers and local governments to link their endeavours to support children in their communities and help them get the best possible start in life.

We have already taken significant steps towards this vision, and many communities across the province have responded enthusiastically. Yet, there is much to be done and the Premier is seeking the ideas, the involvement and the support of everyone in Ontario.

The stakes are high. The support we give to the development of our children in their formative years will shape the future of Ontario.



## **BACKGROUND**

Children have always been a priority of the Mike Harris government. During the 1990s, the Ontario government increased funding to key programs for children despite fiscal pressures caused in part by federal funding cuts to Ontario's health, education and social programs.

- Funding for child care was raised from \$566 million in 1994-95 to \$695 million in 1998-99, an increase of 23%, and the highest level in Ontario's history. Annual child care funding currently exceeds \$700 million.
- The Healthy Babies, Healthy Children program was introduced in 1997 at \$20 million annually to ensure that all children are screened at birth for risk of poor health or development. The program now spends \$67 million annually. In addition to screening, it offers mothers of all newborns a follow-up home visit and ongoing supports where needed.
- In 1997, the Ontario government committed \$20 million to the Pre-school Speech and Language Program to ensure that children with speech and language difficulties receive the help they need before they start school. This year, the total spending on this program increased to \$23 million.
- The new infant hearing screening program will be implemented at an annual cost of \$7 million, focusing on early intervention and treatment of newborn/infant hearing deficiencies.
- In 1998, the Ontario government committed an additional \$170 million over three years to the child welfare system to better protect our most vulnerable citizens. Recent legislative amendments and funding commitments have further strengthened child protection in Ontario.

Our government has also worked with other provincial and territorial governments and the federal government to help low-income working families through the development of a National Child Benefit (NCB). The NCB allowed provincial governments working in their own jurisdictions to address child and family challenges particular to their communities.

Building on the province's commitment to children, Premier Harris commissioned the *Early Years Study* in 1998. This groundbreaking initiative gathered and synthesized the evidence of the importance of children's early years.

When the Legislature returned in October 1999, the Ontario government's Throne Speech committed to a bold new initiative that ultimately will extend early-development opportunities to every child and parent in Ontario.





***The Harris government believes that all of Ontario's children should have access to the opportunities they need to get off to the best possible start in life — regardless of background, community or income. But government can't do it alone — everyone must be involved.***

## **ONTARIO ACTION ON EARLY YEARS**

Premier Mike Harris commissioned the *Early Years Study*, led by world-renowned child development expert Dr. Fraser Mustard and child advocate and former New Brunswick Lieutenant-Governor the Honourable Margaret McCain.

In April 1999, Premier Harris released the *Early Years Study*, which synthesized the latest research and examined community initiatives in Ontario that focused on improving outcomes for young children. The study provided compelling evidence that:

- a child's brain development, especially during the first three years of life, sets the foundation for lifelong learning, behaviour and health; and,
- developmental opportunities must be made available to all young children and their families.

The *Early Years Study* concluded that government's role is to help eliminate barriers and create incentives for communities to build on existing programs in ways that meet their local needs, with support from all sectors.

In August 1999, at last year's Annual Premiers' Conference, Premier Harris led the discussion on early child development. He presented the study to all of Canada's Premiers to raise awareness of the importance of children's early years and to initiate action. Premiers reviewed the key findings of the *Early Years Study* and identified children's issues as a top priority.

In April 2000, the World Bank hosted a conference on early child development, chaired in part by the Honourable Margaret Marland, Ontario's first-ever Minister responsible for Children.

The *Early Years Study* has caught the interest and captured the imagination of community and government leaders across Canada and around the world. So far, more than 20,000 copies of the study have been distributed. Even more exciting is the growing list of business leaders, service clubs and charities that are committing support. Some examples follow.



- Philip Donne, President of Kellogg Canada, is volunteering his time to chair the recently appointed Early Years Task Group. Kellogg Canada continues to contribute to early years initiatives, most recently sponsoring the Parent Help Line, along with Bell Canada and Zellers.
- Bram Appel is supporting a school-based program in North Bay and the expansion of this progressive model to schools across Nipissing and Parry Sound Districts. A “Working Together For Children Foundation” is being established with the support of the Appel family and local business and service sector leaders.
- The United Way of Ottawa is leading the “Success by 6” Early Years Demonstration Project in Ottawa-Carleton, mobilizing community, business and voluntary sector support for early child development.
- Rod Bryden, owner of the Ottawa Senators, is leading work in Ottawa-Carleton to secure business investment in early child development. He has also committed \$100,000 over two years from the Ottawa Senators Foundation to support Ottawa-Carleton’s “Success by 6” project. The United Way of Ottawa-Carleton has matched this commitment with a \$100,000 contribution over the next two years.
- Kanata Research Park, owned by Terry Matthews, formerly of Newbridge Networks, has partnered with the Region of Ottawa-Carleton to build a leading edge on-site early child development centre for high-tech employees and their families. This also enhances the competitive edge of participant companies in attracting and retaining employees.
- The Atkinson Charitable Foundation has established a \$1-million Challenge Fund, with funding from partners including automakers and the Canadian Autoworkers Union, to promote early child development initiatives in communities.
- The Regional Municipality of Sudbury has contributed \$50,000 to the community’s efforts to expand early years initiatives.
- York Region’s Early Years Demonstration Project secured a \$50,000 business contribution in partnership with the United Way of York Region.
- The “Millennium Project — Healthy Beginnings” of Rotary Club, District 7070, is promoting the importance of “The Early Years of Life” in 52 clubs from Picton in the east, to Woodbridge in the west, to Alliston in the north, and all the communities throughout Toronto and York Region.

Public awareness of the importance of children’s early years is growing, and every day more people are getting involved. Communities across Ontario are holding forums and town hall meetings to discuss how they can invest in early child development. Community leaders know they can make their communities stronger and healthier in the long-term by investing in children’s early years.





The Ontario government has shown leadership through a number of steps, including:

- \$94 million in new annual funding to provide a better start for approximately 150,000 newborn children in Ontario each year — giving new mothers the option to stay in the hospital for 60 hours after the birth of a baby (\$27 million).
- Through the Healthy Babies, Healthy Children program, providing newborn screening and follow-up phone calls, with an offer of a home visit, within 48 hours of hospital discharge to see how mothers and children are doing; and, providing on-going support and information through home visiting and service co-ordination (\$67 million).
- Guaranteed funding for junior kindergarten, and through the Early Learning Grant, providing equivalent funding to school boards that choose not to offer junior kindergarten so they can design early learning programs that best meet the needs of young children in their communities.
- Five distinct Early Years Demonstration Projects in each of the major regions of the province to test and evaluate different community-based approaches to early child development and parenting. These projects secure matching cash and in-kind contributions from the business and not-for-profit sectors to help expand early years support.
- A commitment of up to \$15 million this year and \$30 million in subsequent years to an Early Years Challenge Fund to match contributions to local early child development and parenting programs from the business, charitable and voluntary sectors.
- A pilot assessment in the five Early Years Demonstration Project communities of children's social, emotional, physical and mental development upon entering school. The results will help communities plan for needed early years supports. Results from the five Early Years Demonstration communities are expected in the fall of 2000.
- The Appointment of a 10-member Early Years Task Group, chaired by Philip Donne, President of Kellogg Canada, to advise the government on overcoming barriers and obstacles to building a province-wide network of early child development and parenting initiatives. The Task Group will deliver an interim report to Children's Minister Margaret Marland in October 2000 and a final report by April 2001.
- Continued public education and awareness activities on the importance of children's early years.

These initiatives are part of the Ontario government's long-term strategy to advance the understanding of early child development and to make effective child development programs available to communities throughout the province.



## ***FUTURE CHALLENGES: A CALL TO ACTION***

The people of Ontario are proud of their province. All Canadians share the sentiment of the United Nations — Canada is the best place in the world to live — and we want to build an even brighter future.

To ensure we meet this goal, we must work together. Everyone in Ontario has a role to play in fostering the strong and healthy development of our children.

### **Government's Role in Early Child Development**

Parents have the primary responsibility for raising their children. The Ontario government intends to support parents in that role — ensuring that Ontario's children have all the opportunities and support they need to get off to the best possible start in life. Through initiatives such as the Demonstration Projects, the Harris government is supporting early child development in our communities. However, we must build on these accomplishments and help make Ontario's children the envy of the world.

The Ontario government has accepted the challenges outlined in the *Early Years Study*. To meet those challenges, we must now work to build strong partnerships and mobilize action in our communities.

We must also ask ourselves and our partners some tough questions:

**How can we encourage local community and political leaders to take up the challenge to ensure early child development opportunities are available to every child throughout our province?**

**What further action can the government of Ontario take to encourage communities to utilize opportunities for early child development, such as the Challenge Fund?**

### **The Volunteer Spirit**

Ontario benefits from the millions of volunteers who help make our communities safe, caring and prosperous. The provincial government is committed to working with volunteers, volunteer organizations and businesses to build strong communities. In 2001, The International Year for Volunteers offers an opportunity to renew the spirit of voluntarism and build a legacy of civic responsibility.





This sense of civic responsibility that we all share is something we can build on to help ensure that our children have the support they need to keep our province strong. By putting this spirit of community to work to help our children, we are not only helping them to reach their full potential, we are teaching our children an important part of our heritage and passing down a tradition for future generations.

In recognition of the contribution that volunteers and volunteer organizations make to our economic vitality and social well-being, the government of Ontario supports a number of initiatives to promote volunteer action across the province. But we are looking for ways to build on this momentum.

**How can communities unleash the spirit of voluntarism to help all children gain the early child development support they require?**

**How can we engage youth, adults and seniors to benefit young children?**

**How can governments remove barriers and create incentives to engage and sustain increased volunteer involvement?**

## **A Role for Everyone**

Improving outcomes for *all* young children is a large task and requires a shared and sustained effort by all parts of society — parents and other caregivers, educators, business leaders, service clubs, the charitable and voluntary sectors, and government.

In the United States, the public debate has progressed beyond the issue of whether government or business is best at delivering public services. Today, the debate focuses on the appropriate roles the public, private, voluntary and faith sectors should play.

In the United Kingdom, Parliament has adopted a Social Compact with the voluntary sector, stating that government alone cannot take sole responsibility for meeting the needs of its citizens. The need for shared responsibility has become self-evident.

Every sector of society has a direct interest in ensuring that Ontario's children are given the best possible start to life. All sectors share a responsibility to contribute to the society that sustains them.

The potential roles for some sectors are clear, but are less so for others. The challenge is to clarify those roles while we deepen the understanding of the importance of early years and coordinate action across sectors.

**What are the most effective roles for private sector organizations to play in fostering child development?**

**How can we best engage these leaders to help meet the challenge?**



**How should we co-ordinate their efforts?**

## ***MEASURING OUR PROGRESS***

Governments must always make the best use of public resources and must always be accountable to the public for effectively spending tax dollars. Communities need to know how well they're doing in improving outcomes for children.

We need efficient and effective ways to measure our progress, especially at the neighbourhood/community level where families raise their children.

**How do we track and measure our success locally?**

**How should we track our progress at the provincial level?**

## ***NEXT STEPS***

### **Sustaining the Positive Outcomes of Good Early Child Development**

Getting children off to the best start in life establishes a critical foundation. But we can't stop there — children continue to grow and develop. We must continue to provide support and to challenge all sectors of society to help children successfully complete their formal education, and become healthy, contributing adults in their communities.

**How can government remove barriers and create incentives to engage and sustain community efforts with children as they continue to grow and develop?**

**Are there successful approaches in other jurisdictions from which we might learn?**

Ontario will continue to lead the challenge of helping all children reach their full potential. In the coming months, the provincial government will be introducing new initiatives in pursuit of this goal.





## ***THE ONTARIO GOVERNMENT WOULD LIKE TO HEAR FROM YOU***

If you have thoughts or ideas about the questions posed in this paper, or other ideas about how the people of Ontario can work together to help support children in the early years, please write or e-mail Premier Mike Harris at:

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